

Addressing the Need For More Effective Battle Drill Execution

by Major Kevin W. Wright

Few would argue that battle drills are fundamental to winning engagements and battles. *FM 25-100, Training the Force* defines battle drill as “a collective action executed by platoon or smaller elements without applying a deliberate decision making process.” A drill is “initiated on cue, such as an enemy action, or simple leader’s order, and is a trained response to the given stimulus. It requires minimal leader orders and is standard throughout like units.” The digitized battlefield will increase the amount of information that will be instantly available to leaders and therefore increase, not decrease, the need for battle drill. We should, therefore, be very concerned that observers at each of our Combat Training Centers (CTCs) have long been telling us that units have problems executing battle drills.

CTC Trends publications state that in making contact, “Bluefor units habitually fail to execute fire and maneuver” (*CTC Trends* NTC 2QFY95). The observer goes on to recommend that units emphasize platoon and company battle drills in training. During one CTC rotation there were 67 contacts documented. Only 23% of these contacts were initiated by Bluefor and a battle drill was initiated in only 22 of the contacts. The good news cited by observers was that “when executed, drills were done well.” If this is true, then the solution to unit problems is not simply to increase time spent practicing drill execution. If soldiers, crews, and platoons are able to execute drills as trained, then leader failure to plan, prepare, and supervise drill execution with an eye to mission accomplishment may be the underlying problem.

Leaders must understand that the fundamental purpose of a drill is to posture the unit for continuing its mission. A drill, like all other battlefield actions, must not be wholly reactive. While one purpose of a drill is to “enhance the chance for individual and unit survival on the battlefield” (*FM 25-100*) its successful execution can only be measured by how efficiently the unit or crew is prepared to continue its tactical mission. A drill executed flawlessly in accordance with manuals can take too much time or possess an end state in which the unit is no longer postured to accomplish its mis-

sion. A well executed drill is not simply one which merits a “GO” on all its elements, but also one which is tailored to the situation and allows the unit to continue its mission. Some drills, such as change of formation or movement techniques not only protect the force but can place the unit at a position of advantage so that the enemy must react. An ability to execute these drills is only a partial solution. Anticipating the drill, briefing it, and rehearsing it so that the drill is tailored to the terrain and relation of forces is a must. Crews and platoons must not execute drills strictly in accordance with the diagrams and sub-tasks of manuals without regard to their situation and relation to other forces. As *FM 25-100* states, battle drills “build from the simple to the complex and focus on the basics.”

Ideally, individual, crew, and platoon battle drills are nearly transparent to the team commander as he quickly assesses the situation and provides only those instructions which focus the unit on continuing its mission. In a recent NTC rotation, the lead team of a TF attack was unable to successfully LD, let alone accomplish its mission, as a direct result of poor drill execution. The team was in an attack position when it was hit with artillery, which included a non-persistent nerve agent. Although this attack could, and should, have been templated, the team still had the potential to accomplish its mission had it only executed battle drill effectively. For nearly an hour, the team’s communications and decision-making energies were consumed with reacting to the attack rather than with continuing its mission. Movement to subsequent locations, M256 kit procedures, masking/unmasking, evacuation of casualties, and reporting were a few of the many activities of the unit. When viewed in isolation, all these actions are valid, but collectively, the unit lost its mission focus. We fight as we train. The unit did not train using multi-echeloned techniques in which individual, crew, and platoon drills were executed simultaneously during a company mission. It is not surprising, therefore, that having to do so in “battle” proved to be too much of a challenge. This is a common occurrence at Combat Training Centers. If a unit can’t quickly formulate and translate

decisions after contact, then it is not trained adequately on drill and the leadership does not understand that a drill is only a means to continue the mission. Individuals must be aware that their execution of tasks must contribute to, not distract from, the crew’s ongoing actions. Crews and platoons, in turn, must not allow their drilled activity to detract from the unit mission.

Drill execution may not require a deliberate decision-making process, but the leader who plans for and anticipates drills goes a long way towards ensuring their success. Smart leaders anticipate required actions based on their vision of the enemy and themselves on the terrain throughout an operation. This mental visualization or wargame allows the leader to anticipate the need for drills so that they can be briefed and rehearsed. During another NTC rotation, a team deployed to the LD only to have an enemy artillery-delivered FASCAM fired on it. The FASCAM blocked a defile where the team was situated. None of the platoons knew how to react, and the commander failed to develop the situation. The unit quickly became attrited to the point that it was no longer able to function as the TF advanced guard. Had the commander applied his knowledge of enemy doctrine and capabilities with the S2’s template, he could have anticipated the required drills. He and his leaders could have then planned and rehearsed the required drills and executed them given the terrain and array of friendly forces at that point. TF and company operations orders rarely address actions on contact with any specificity.

Proper training is the essential element in preparing units to effectively execute battle drills. “The goal of training,” from *ARTEP 7-8 DRILL*, “is to produce combat ready units that respond rapidly to known or suspected enemy activity and defeat the enemy. Battle drill training is a key factor in achieving that goal.” Our current training doctrine provides the necessary framework for effective drill training. Leaders must know the drills found in doctrine and identify which individual tasks support them. Leaders must know how their collective tasks relate to the company’s collective tasks,

especially those that are mission essential. Existing manuals make this job of "cross-walking" the relationship of tasks easy for anyone who understands how to use them. Only by first knowing what must be trained at every level can the leader then develop a training strategy for the unit as a whole.

A unit must develop a thoughtful training strategy. The unit's training strategy should allow the NCO chain to develop individual skill proficiency of tasks which support unit drills. During the "crawl" stage, sand tables, terrain models, and walk-throughs are easy means of ensuring complete understanding of the mechanics of drills. These means allow the leader to not only assess subordinate understanding but also to start introducing conditions of enemy and terrain that will lead to variations of a given drill. Platoon leaders, it is your job to ensure your sergeants train proficiency on individual skills, and it is your job to develop crew drill training plans. The -10 Operator's Manual, *FM 17-12*, and *FM 17-15 MTP*, and the assistance of your platoon sergeant and company master gunner should get you there. As the unit progresses, it should employ the principle of multi-echelon training. This is an efficient means of training related individual and collective tasks simultaneously. The development of training "lanes" is a logical first step. An essential benefit from this training is that it allows everyone in the unit to understand how the tasks they trained relate to other unit activities and boosts leader confidence that these tasks will occur without continuous personal involvement.

Effective drill training requires a unit to execute drills under varying conditions and with the pressing demands of a tactical mission. If a unit trains drill execution outside the context of a tactical mission under realistic conditions, i.e., in a vacuum, then it is practicing only the reactive purpose of a drill and not its more fundamental purpose of regaining the initiative. Our tank and Bradley firing tables are examples of where we often lose the opportunity to integrate realistic tactical play. Lane training is great, but not sufficient. Company commander, do not fail to take the next steps in training progression. The unit must not simply do things right, it must also do the right things in the context of a mission involving other forces. A platoon trains its collective tasks best when it is training with other platoons and reacting to a company commander who is in turn a tactical player. Battalion commander, if you want "killer platoons," then you had better deploy the battalion at some point; and if your battalion is training in simulations,

make sure you are an active player. Likewise, effective crew training ultimately requires company operations. The challenge is that units infrequently deploy for training as companies and task forces in the existing resource-challenged environment. Simulations and virtual reality can assist but only if brigade and battalion staffs and commanders assume the active player role necessary to maximize such training. The synergistic effect of a task force cannot be realized simply by bringing together crews and platoons. It doesn't matter if they are superbly trained to execute battle drill.

The development and internalization of unit standard operating procedures are essential to battle drill execution. The drills that a unit may have to do are by no means entirely captured in existing doctrine, nor does doctrine dictate how to execute battle drill for every unit's unique situation. This is the domain of a unit's SOP. An SOP or operations order need not address every possible contingency. The types of contact are actually finite: direct, indirect, visual, air attack, and NBC. An SOP or order that addresses when and where these actions are most likely and the specific plan to react is an achievable goal.

The rehearsal is then a vehicle for synchronizing the individual, crew, and unit actions for each. Commander, if you do not want an SOP that serves its best purpose as a petroleum product absorbent at the bottom of the left stowage bin, then develop it as a result of and concurrent with the ongoing training experience. A useful SOP, one that your soldiers know and apply, is relevant to more than the individual who typically writes it prior to a major exercise.

So far, I have stated that leaders must understand the purpose of drills, train their execution thoughtfully, and then must anticipate their execution in a given tactical situation. Effective drill execution also requires that the leader communicate his "vision" of the drills that he anticipates. This vision must be conveyed in terms of the terrain and relation of forces where it will possibly occur. The same terrain boards and sand table tools used in training are also useful in conveying this vision. Sketches are also a useful complement to the leader's verbal description of the battle drill. The logical time in an operations order to address battle drill execution is in coordinating instructions, a sub-paragraph of which should always be "actions on contact." The most critical battle drills, those during the decisive action, can be emphasized by addressing them as part of actions on the objective or actions in the engagement area.

An example of how one tank platoon leader conveys part of his "vision" will further illuminate the discussion at this point:

"Again, we are the lead platoon along AXIS RAY to PL MANTA. 1st Platoon, with the commander, will LD following us on the right with 2nd Platoon following on the left. Along AXIS RAY is the templated combat outpost with two BMPs and around 12 dismounts forward of Hill 114. We will be in a wedge formation using traveling overwatch. We will attempt to destroy this COP using contact left as we maneuver along the low ground to the east. If we must transition to bounding then A Section will deploy in an ABF while B Section bounds past us to CP 5 to the east with the planned support of a suppression fire mission which I will initiate. If bypass appears impossible, then B Section will deploy on my right flank and I will request that the company commander designate us as the fixing force for the movement of the remainder of the team to OBJ MAIN."

This excerpt from a platoon operations order, while simple, represents the type of planning and communication that is all too often lacking, according to observers at our major training centers.

No amount of technology and digitization is going to reduce the importance of battle drill in the foreseeable future. Training drill to standard continues to be a priority for most units. We cannot rise above the current deficient state of battle drill proficiency, however, unless we train it right. Leaders must gain an understanding of the purpose of drills, train them in a smart way, and communicate their execution effectively. Given a tactical mission, leaders must further apply the planning, preparation, and execution of battle drills to the relation of enemy and friendly forces as arrayed on the terrain. Drills are our bread and butter. They are what sergeants, lieutenants, and captains are paid to do well.

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